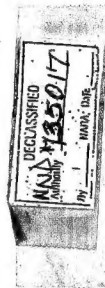


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Report of Operations - 18th Tank Bn

14th Armd Div

Jan 45



Lupstein, France
January 30, 1945

Had Plutarch been held accountable for the accuracy of his biographies, the world would early have forgotten its most colorful heroes. Were we to recal Plutarch from his stygian abode and appoint him biographer of the 48th Tank Battalion in action at Rittershofen, his fabricating genius would humbly bend in deference to the romance of the unvarnished facts.

On January 12 orders came down to our alert position in Surburg to move forward to Betschderf, a town before Rittershofen where our A Company tanks had been engaged by a German Panzer Unit. The Mortar Platoon was needed in close support.

The first time we had seen Betschdorf was shortly after the Germans had cleared out. A dead mule and occasional gaps in tiled roofs were mute evidence of the light artillery fire that had recently been lifted. This time the Jerrys were attempting the road back. The shells whistling overhead and explosions in the skirting fields were very real evidence of their determination.

We left a messenger at the Battalion C. P. and continued forward to an orchard at the northern end of town. The position did not offer much cover or defalade, but we did take maximum advantage of a slightly declining slope. The guns were immediately set on an azimuth to a central point in Rittershofen. Our sights were zeroed in and our outpost guard set up when the Jerrys decided to disturb our peace. Two A. P. shells whipped up snow and dirt ten yards behind our rear vehicle. These were soon followed by a rapid succession of tree bursts to our left front. Shrapnel whistled through the naked trees and ripped large splinters from many tree trunks.

In the latter part of the afternoon, during an interval between the spasmodic shellings that continued through the day, our machine

guns suddenly sang out their staccato warning that a plane that "had the devil on its tail." Without the familiar prelude of a motor drone it screamed over head and out of sight. The explosion that followed in town was lost in the din of artillery shells exploding once again in the field to our left. Our machine gun guard was voluntarily doubled for the remainder of the day in the hope that we might have another crack at what we later learned was a jet propelled plane. He gave us one more opportunity late that afternoon, but he was gone before we saw our front sights.

No fire mission came through that first day, but we felt that we'd had a fair share of activity when our messenger came from headquarters in the evening to tell us to mount up for our return to Surburg.

In Surburg we received the information that our A Company tanks had knocked out fourteen of the Bosch' Big Boys (heavy tanks), that the enemy was forced back and that our Doughs (infantry) were holding the position.

Next morning, however, the news was not pleasant. During the night Germans had infiltrated into Ritterschofen and reestablished their positions. We moved out promptly that morning and returned to our previous location in the Northend Orchard. Instead of a smooth field of white snow, we found gaping holes and sprays of black powder every where. One shell would have made a center hit on our number one track and but few in the area would have spared our bother crews. A few shells coming in behind, warned us against remaining there.

We set up in court yards nearby and soon received our first fire mission. We felt better having the score evened up with the opportunity to return a few rounds.

Orders soon came to move forward for better observation of our

fire. The map indicated an excellent mortar position behind a high ridge, 800 yards from Rittershofen. We drove up the main road until the church steeple was clearly in view. We knew this would be no rest camp and were tensed with anticipation. The guns were immediately set on the stakes and digging-in began.

Most of us hadn't quite hacked and spaded through a foot of icy resistance when the tenseness broke. It came with fierce suddenness and showered hot shrapnel all around us. Shells were landing within eight and ten feet of our shallow holes. We were laying flat on top of each other with prayers as our greatest protection. They must have been good prayers, because despite lead in some and near all of the holes, and scratched vehicles we all remained unscratched. We renewed our burrowing efforts and turned out some fancy subterranean quarters.

When the radio began buzzing out its orders, picks and shovels were dropped and all guns were manned. Our first concentration was to be on a railroad crossing. Sights were adjusted, guns turned and rounds on their way. The radio receiver seemed to pick up new spirit as "Swell work! Right on target!" rang out of the earphone. With justifiable pride we inscribed another mark on our success tablet.

The Jerrys threw plenty in that day. Their shells dug craters that were fair competition for our extensive digging efforts. They even sent Gasless Gus, the jet threat, around again, but all in vain. Our spirits remained high because round after round was hurled back at them, with effect extraordinary, as our radio reported. Late that second evening we returned for our last night in Surburg.

We were in column again early in the morning of the fourteenth. All efforts were to be coordinated for attack. We sped along the

road between Botschdort and Rittershofen. In the fields was an impressive array of armor and infantry girded for the assault. We pulled into the ridge position, held the previous day, set up, emptied and untaped a truck load of smoke ammunition in record time and had our first rounds poised at the gun-muzzles ready to drop.

There was some heavy artillery to soften the Bosch, but it was at the time given us to start laying a smoke screen that all seven circles of hell broke loose: tanks rolled, infantry charged and every gun blasted. Anything human couldn't have survived, but the Germans stuck.

They must have added a chapter of two before they hurled "the book" back at us. When it came they didn't leave a sentence or a word out. We still had a few things to say though, before morning had passed, and they heard them all.

Jerry may not have known where we were, but an elementary map would have shown him that behind that ridge was a likely location for us. We couldn't stay there long, he knew his ranges too well. We moved about three hundred yards back, to an open field position where infantry had previously been dug in. This position could only be temporary.

A scouting party went out to check an area behind a high banked railroad. The only road we could find leading there was through a Kraut artillery impact area. From our ridge position we had seen it intermittently shelled during the two days we were there. We waited until one of the poundings seemed complete, raced forward until the church steeple was again in view and then tore like the proverbial bat out of hell through the danger zone. As we reached the embankment, the shells began exploding behind us. We lurched over the crossing into the comparative safety of defilade. This was

the position that the manuals prescribe. Our first rounds were seen on the way. Never, even in training, had we had such an ideal position, target and effect.

Our mission was to stop Kraut infantry from advancing. We were on target, we could now unleash avenging torrents of hot lead. We laid them in by the gross. Heinie was stopped from any further movement thru there.

Kraut counterfire peppered the opposite side of the railroad embankment. The vibrations shook huge clods of mud loose from the tops of our horizontal foxholes. While the exchange of mortar and artillery fire continued we heard four thunderous explosions behind us. His artillery couldn't reach us; he had turned loose his bombers.

Orders came over the radio to remain in our positions and continue firing through the night. Eyes turned with grim determination to the frozen foxholes, as a soul rending, unvoiced curse on every tongue damned all creation. The immense weight of oppression was soon lifted, however, when the order was rescinded and under cover of darkness, we turned to Betschdorf.

We set up for defensive night fire and established an area and alert guard. Kraut fire continued through the night, but we received no further orders until morning. Our command track had been parked in a courtyard near a vital intersection. Shells were heard exploding in the area during the night, but it was not until their results were seen in daylight that we knew in what close proximity we had been with death. Three shells had torn through the corner building. Tile, brick and spent lead were piled on the top and hood of the track.

We hadn't time to clean off all the rubble when orders came to

roll back into the central arena. When the ruins of Rittershofen came again into view, we started across the open field as the Germans cut loose. Their timing had improved. Shrapnell pierced our thinner armor in several places and had left permanent battle scars on our heavier armor.

We set up to fire the same concentration that had been so effective the day before. A Jerry "burp gun" open fire on us from the crest of the ridge that had been our earlier position. His fire was slightly high. A Dog Company tank finished him as his reports revealed his location.

Through expertly coordinated effort and avenging determination the entire platoon made the next three days a record of achievement. Despite the continued heavy concentration of enemy artillery fire and frequent narrassing by enemy planes the mission was accomplished with the success that has long festered our mutual pride. There was no 7th Army "Ardennes", but it was close.

Hold Plutarch! Before you return to yon River Styx, agree that we have meritted your coveted laurel wreath.

